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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 001024

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SENSITIVE

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TAGS: PHUM SOCI PREL PGOV KIRF VM HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: STATUS OF HCMC'S NEW LIFE FELLOWSHIP CHURCH STILL AT AN IMPASSE

REF: HCMC 949

1. (SBU) Summary: The unregistered expatriate New Life Fellowship Church continues to meet in small groups following HCMC police cancellation of its weekly church services at a hotel in HCMC's District 5 in late August. NLF Pastor-in-Charge told us September 26 that he had declined overtures from the local recognized Vietnamese Protestant Church to share facilities. The NLF also appears reluctant to work with HCMC authorities on how it might resume operations in other hotels in HCMC, even as HCMC authorities responsible for religious affairs took the unusual step of asking ConGen to intercede with the NLF to begin a dialogue. The church may be more interested in leveraging its predicament to focus greater international attention on religious freedom issues in Vietnam rather than seeking a quiet solution. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On September 26, we met with Eric Dooley, Pastor-in-Charge of the unregistered New Life Fellowship Protestant Church. Dooley reported that, following its inability to access hotel facilities in HCMC's District 5 due to local police pressure (reftel), the church continues to meet in groups of 20 at members' homes throughout the city. Police have not interrupted these gatherings.

3. (SBU) Dooley told us that during a recent meeting with a local pastor of the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), the SECV invited Dooley to share facilities as a first step towards legalization of the NLF's status. The SECV pastor reportedly said that the Korean expatriate community had successfully followed this model for its church in HCMC. Dooley told us that he informed the SECV pastor that such an arrangement would not be possible for the NLF. He and his congregation did not want to share facilities with another church. He believed that local church facilities were not adequate for expatriates; he also did not want to deal with the problems of coordinating schedules, competing for members and sharing space with a local church. Moreover, locking the NLF into a particular church building would restrict the growth of his community.

4. (SBU) What the NLF wanted was to operate from any hotel or any locality of its choosing without interference or regulation from Vietnamese authorities. While he understood that the HCMC Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) had asked him to explore a return to the District 1 hotel (from which the NLF operated until moving in January 2005), he was not prepared to do so on an ad hoc basis. Rather, he and NLF members were looking at using their situation to build outside pressure on the GVN to change its laws governing where church services could be conducted and, more broadly, to press for greater religious freedom in Vietnam. He also indicated that the NLF was upset at how it was treated by District 5 authorities and was not inclined to help HCMC find a face-saving solution by quietly returning to another hotel. Dooley complained that the Vice Chairman of the HCMC CRA had never called him despite promises to do so. Dooley said that he had sent a letter to the HCMC CRA outlining his reluctance to explore a partnership with the SECV. (Copy sent Embassy Hanoi and EAP/MLS.)

5. (SBU) Dooley asked what impact his church's situation would have on USG deliberations on Vietnam's status as a country of particular concern. We noted that we were concerned about the inability of his church to gather at a particular hotel in District 5 following apparent police pressure on the hotel management. That said, we explained that the national-level Secretary General of the SECV had confirmed to us that he had been

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contacted by the CRA and asked to assist the NLF, if possible. The Secretary General had told us that he was willing to work with the NLF and had asked that we urge Dooley to work directly with him -- and not just a local SECV pastor -- to discuss what options might be available in partnership with the SECV. We also suggested to Dooley that he revisit the option of approaching another hotel in HCMC from which to operate, perhaps even working with the CRA on a joint approach. While ultimately it would be his and his congregation's choice as to what course of action to take, it did seem to us from our conversations with the CRA and the SECV that efforts were being made to try and find both a short-term and long-term solution to the NLF's status as a church for expatriates in Vietnam. Dooley was non-committal.

CRA trying to reach out

16. (SBU) On September 27, HCMC CRA Vice-Chairman Tran Ngoc Bao called us to request ConGen assistance in contacting Pastor Dooley. He said that he and his staff had called the phone number that Dooley had given him, but that no one answered. (We passed that message to Dooley via email, who committed to contacting Bao.) When asked about his understanding of the NLF, Bao said that he had suggested to Dooley in their first meeting immediately after the District 4 shutdown that the church resume its operations in District 1. He noted that he had asked the SECV to talk to Dooley, but that Dooley preferred to hold services in a hotel. Bao explained that by holding services at an SECV church, the NLF would be in a position to register more easily under Vietnam's new legal framework on religion. Bao welcomed continued dialogue with Dooley to try and resolve the NLF's predicament.

17. (SBU) Comment: The request of the HCMC CRA that we act as a middleman to contact Dooley is highly unorthodox. It appears to reflect an appreciation of the potential seriousness of the NLF problem and CRA's efforts to find a quiet solution. Our words of counsel to Dooley were aimed at encouraging the NLF to test the CRA's offer of dialogue and compromise. End Comment.

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